



Public Involvement and the Organizational Landscape

State Departments of Transportation Undergo Culture Shift

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A remarkable culture shift is occurring in some departments of transportation (DOTs) across the United States—a new commitment to public involvement is permeating organizations. Public involvement professionals have become part of the organizational landscape in at least three DOTs. These professionals are not engineers but come to the DOT with conflict-management, presentation, problem-solving, negotiation, facilitation, and team-building skills. They work in DOT regional offices, close to the publics they serve.

In at least one DOT, the expanding movement toward context-sensitive design (CSD) has driven the emphasis on public involvement. The Federal Highway Administration defines CSD as a “collaborative, interdisciplinary approach that involves all stakeholders [in developing] a transportation facility that fits its physical setting and preserves scenic, aesthetic, historic, and environmental resources, while maintaining safety and mobility.” Several states are piloting the CSD approach to transportation projects (see box, page 19).

In other states, emphasis on public involvement is simply a recognition of change. Public interest groups have made the development of better methods for highway design a major part of their agendas. These groups often give priority to protecting historic and natural resources and residential neighborhoods instead of following a DOT's high-capacity designs.

Public Pressures

High-capacity designs often already have incurred substantial preliminary engineering costs before submittal for public comment. More and more, the public wants a say in how transportation improvements fit into the character of their communities and is

challenging the plans of highway engineers. The public also wants opportunity for input early in the process, before the first line is put on paper.

A DOT's credibility is questioned constantly, and engineers are learning that stopping projects after 30 percent of the design work is complete is neither good business nor a wise investment of taxpayer dollars. Some state DOTs are discovering that a successful highway design process includes early and continuous public involvement.

DOTs have provided opportunity for good public involvement but usually on a high-profile, project-by-project basis. Engineering divisions typically oversee the projects, and the design consultants often subcontract the public involvement process. Most public involvement occurs when a project reaches construction, particularly if the project affects large volumes of traffic.

But public involvement is more than a line item in a consultant engineering budget. Some agencies are changing their organizational structure significantly and hiring people with skill sets not associated with DOTs. These DOTs also are providing a stronger role for their public affairs departments.

Yet many DOTs are struggling over how to become more proactive in involving the public in project development. Three DOTs that are blazing new territory and attempting to make public involvement a part of their core business can serve as models.

Wyoming DOT: Formal Framework

For the past 25 years, Wyoming DOT's environmental program has handled public involvement activities. The assignment arose from the agency's need to follow guidelines and meet requirements for producing documents—including environmen-

What Is “Context-Sensitive Design”?

Context-sensitive design (CSD) is an approach that involves a community's many stakeholders at the earliest stages to create a highway appropriate to its use and environs, that links bicyclists and pedestrians to other transportation modes, and that is safe, durable, and low-maintenance. CSD carefully fits the highway to its surroundings.

The approach comes from a growing demand for more public involvement in decisions about new or improved highways that will affect local communities. In May 1998, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, the Maryland Department of Transportation, and the Maryland State Highway Administration sponsored a national workshop, “Thinking Beyond the Pavement.” The workshop produced agreements on the specific qualities of excellence in highway design and the characteristics of the process contributing to excellence. Following are some of the workshop findings.



Kentucky applies context-sensitive design to build roads and bridges.

Qualities of Design Excellence

- ◆ The project satisfies the purpose and needs as agreed to by a full range of stakeholders. The agreement is forged during the earliest phase of the project and is amended as warranted.
- ◆ The project is a safe facility for users and the community.
- ◆ The project is in harmony with the community and preserves environmental, scenic, aesthetic, historic, and natural resource values of the area.
- ◆ The project exceeds the expectations of designers and stakeholders and achieves a level of excellence.
- ◆ The project involves efficient and effective use of resources, including time and budget.
- ◆ The project is designed and built with minimal disruption to the community.
- ◆ The project adds lasting value to the community.

Contributing Characteristics

- ◆ Communication with all stakeholders is open, honest, early, and continuous.
- ◆ A multidisciplinary team is established early—with disciplines matching the needs of the specific project—and includes the public.
- ◆ A full range of stakeholders joins transportation officials in determining the project's scope, clearly defining the purposes of the project, and reaching consensus before proceeding.
- ◆ The highway development process is tailored to the circumstances, examines multiple alternatives, but results in a consensus approach.
- ◆ Top agency officials and local leaders are committed to the process.
- ◆ The public involvement process, which includes informal meetings, is tailored to the project.
- ◆ The landscape, the community, and valued resources are understood before the engineering design begins.
- ◆ A full range of tools for communication about project alternatives is used—for example, visualization techniques.

CSD Pioneers

Five states—Connecticut, Kentucky, Maryland, Minnesota, and Utah—and FHWA's Federal Lands Highway Division have been the first to explore CSD. Efforts include strategic plans, extensive training for employees and project participants, incorporating the approach into project development, and creating implementation resources. More details are available on FHWA's CSD website, www.fhwa.dot.gov/csd.

“Any Time, Anywhere, with Anybody” **Agency’s Public Involvement Mantra Pays Off**

BRUCE MANSFIELD

The Ohio Department of Transportation’s (DOT’s) metropolitan planning process is setting new standards for public involvement. The agency has found that programs focusing on outreach and tailored to a specific community’s needs and issues produce community partnerships that enhance project outcomes and public acceptance.

Ohio DOT’s Cleveland Innerbelt Project team has adopted the mantra of “any time, anywhere, with anybody” for meetings with the public. Key aspects of the public involvement program are

- ◆ No request for a meeting is denied;
- ◆ The steering committee is inclusive, with strong neighborhood representation;
- ◆ Graphics are sensitive to neighborhood issues and resources;
- ◆ Newsletters and resource materials are multilingual (in English and Spanish, with selected portions translated into Chinese by community volunteers);
- ◆ Newsletter items relate to neighborhood concerns and cultural resources;
- ◆ Paid advertising is used to publicize events and meetings;
- ◆ Small-group neighborhood workshops and charrettes¹ increase one-on-one interaction;
- ◆ Press briefings result in media coverage and accurate reporting;
- ◆ The website offers opportunity for e-mail input (www.innerbelt.org); and
- ◆ Community organization meetings can provide forums for discussion and input.

The response to Ohio DOT’s outreach has been extraordinary participation, appreciation for the planning process, and a community partnership.

“Because we’ve taken the time to educate the public and listen to their input, we’ve ended up with more cost-effective project alternatives,” notes Suzann Gad, Ohio DOT’s Administrator of Urban and Corridor Planning. Citing the long hours of meetings and workshops with community groups, Gad adds, “It’s amazing to watch citizens defend us now at neighborhood meetings [when someone challenges Ohio DOT’s process]. Proactive public involvement campaigns may appear to cost a fortune, but you couldn’t buy this positive public relations any other way.”

¹ A charrette is a gathering of various groups in a community to resolve common problems with the assistance of outside experts.

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Ohio DOT contracts for onsite child care so that parents can participate in public meetings.

tal impact statements—required by the National Environmental Policy Act and other regulations.

“It’s a role that has expanded continuously over the years—although our employees were meeting the letter of the law, they wanted to do more than just the bare minimum,” says Public Affairs Specialist Bruce Burrows. “Nevertheless, a few years ago, during some difficult proposed projects, the department was portrayed by certain interest

groups as riding roughshod over communities and citizens and was inaccurately accused of not having sufficient and meaningful public involvement.”

As a result, the agency’s director publicly announced an increased commitment to the public involvement process and appointed an agency task force. The task force comprised representatives from the design, environmental, right-of-way, and public affairs programs, as well as the local government coordinator.

"The task force concluded that generalists with excellent communications skills and conflict resolution in their backgrounds should coordinate public involvement, not engineers," Burrows recalls. "They equated public involvement with good customer service, which is supposed to be everybody's responsibility at Wyoming DOT. Doing better meant dedicating more resources, a possible back-breaker if any one program had to assume all the responsibility."

Next steps included the development of a public involvement policy that specified goals and guidelines for program managers and district engineers. The task force referred to guidelines developed by Montana DOT to determine the appropriate level of public involvement in project activities. For example, Level A projects, which typically include maintenance, require the least amount of public involvement, but Level D projects—activities such as environmental impact statements, major realignment, all new alignment projects, and major urban projects—require extensive public involvement.

The agency also approved hiring six public involvement coordinators: one in the headquarters public affairs office and one in each of the state's five districts. The department plans to recruit and fill the positions soon. The five field coordinators will report to the district engineers but also will work closely with the public involvement coordinator at headquarters.

Wyoming DOT is assembling a handbook to guide expanded public involvement efforts. "Our approach will be to give employees a solid understanding of the guiding concepts for effective public involvement, instead of simply providing a bunch of prescriptions to fit specific situations," Burrows says. "The district personnel will have flexibility and discretion—knowing the philosophical framework will serve them well."

"This is not an overnight process," Burrows comments. "It has taken us more than a year to get this far. We'll continuously evaluate the effectiveness of public outreach and make adjustments along the way." But Wyoming DOT will have a formal framework from which to work and some much-needed resources, Burrows points out.¹

Kansas DOT: Bill of Rights

Kansas DOT also has taken a formal approach to public involvement. With several controversial projects on the horizon, the agency decided to improve its public involvement efforts. Before 1998, the

agency's centralized engineering and design staff had handled public involvement, and the districts were responsible only for construction and maintenance projects.

A consulting firm was hired to develop a public involvement plan to guide future changes. The plan was based on input from surveys of Kansas DOT employees, the traveling public, cooperating agencies, legislators, other state departments of transportation, consultants, and contractors. Recommendations included the following:

- ◆ Kansas DOT's organizational structure and culture should be more responsive to the public's need for communication, for example by empowering employees at local levels to address communications issues.

- ◆ The project planning and development process should be changed to allow the public to participate in a timely and meaningful way.

- ◆ Training should increase awareness of what public involvement is and provide Kansas DOT employees with the tools necessary to complete their jobs successfully.

- ◆ Internal communication should be improved, to address public concerns and issues throughout the process.

In addition to the overall recommendations, specific recommendations were made for bureaus within the departments of Planning and Development, Engineering and Design, and Operations. The recommendations addressed Kansas DOT's efforts in three areas: public involvement programming, project-specific public involvement, and organizational public relations and involvement.

Setting Priorities

Because timing, resources, and training were important to the plan, the public involvement recommendations were prioritized. For example, highest priority efforts included

- ◆ Assigning districts a larger role in annual forums;

- ◆ Adding public involvement professionals to implement some of the initiatives and ensure consistency of internal and external communications;

- ◆ Creating a project delivery group, a production line of individuals who evaluate the scope, budget, schedule, and communications issues associated with the project; and

- ◆ Providing the agency's bureaus with templates or communications materials such as news releases, fact sheets, and a "Customer Bill of Rights."

¹ For information about Wyoming DOT's public involvement initiatives, contact Bruce Burrows at Bruce.Burrows@dot.state.wy.us; telephone 307-777-4439.

Positive Feedback in the High Desert

Community Outreach in Rural Arizona

DEBRA BRISK AND JOAN BECKIM

The Arizona Department of Transportation's (DOT's) Kingman District, in the high desert of the northwestern part of the state, has learned in the past five years that an ongoing dialogue with its customers can be a positive experience. The dialogue has developed better agency–customer relationships, has helped design and construction projects run more smoothly, and has produced a better end product for highway users.

Although the Kingman District is considered rural, tourists and residents rely on its hundreds of miles of highways—the roads are heavily traveled. Many local residents drive more than 60 miles to places of employment. Thousands of tourists pass through the area en route to Las Vegas and Laughlin, Nevada; to Hoover Dam and Lake Mead National Recreation Area in Arizona; and to Los Angeles, California. The US-93 Corridor and portions of Interstate 40 are part of the CanaMex Corridor for North American Free Trade Agreement traffic. The cities of Phoenix, Arizona, and Las Vegas provide area residents with major medical services and shopping opportunities not available in their own communities.

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Arizona DOT staffers make a presentation to one of several community groups targeted in the Kingman District outreach campaign.

About five years ago, the district began implementing innovative and proactive community outreach and communication programs as part of its everyday operations and has worked with a communications consultant specializing in transportation. The district's communications team has continued redefining and improving the programs with feedback from the public. Although the primary focus of the communications is on the details of design and the impacts of construction on the traveling public, the district has found that expanding the efforts and listening to stakeholders make a difference.

The communication effort begins with those who will be performing the design and construction of the transportation improvement projects. In addition to traditional methods of public commu-

Traditionally, Kansas DOT's communications with the public had tended to be one-way. Survey participants received most of their information from the newspaper or by word-of-mouth. According to the survey, the majority said that public involvement should begin at the lowest level, with the Kansas DOT employees who are in contact with the public at the area and subarea levels.

As part of the new public involvement plan, Kansas DOT created the Customer Bill of Rights to demonstrate commitment to customer service and public involvement. The Bill of Rights serves as a reference point for employees and has become a keystone of employee orientation materials.

Organizational Structure

Organizational structure also received attention. Ron Kaufman, who joined the department in 1998, was

one of the first public involvement liaisons in the headquarters Division of Public Affairs. He helped hire two other public involvement liaisons for headquarters and one for each of Kansas DOT's six districts.

Today Kaufman heads up the Bureau of Public Involvement, part of the Division of Public Affairs. The headquarters staff report to Kaufman and work closely with the engineering divisions on high-profile projects. The district public involvement liaisons report to the district engineers, but Kaufman coordinates, guides, and advises them.

Although addressing all facets of public involvement in planning, project delivery, and operations, Kansas DOT's organizational plan did not include the public in the process of programming or selecting projects. The consultants have advised the agency to examine how the public could become involved in the selection process, maintaining that Kansas DOT could

nication, the district works with contractors to develop and implement innovative contracting approaches to projects and then communicates the innovations to the public.

Face-to-face meetings with the public are a key part of the district's outreach, as are the use of nontraditional communication tools and research efforts to measure and evaluate communications programs. For example, the district relies on feedback from project-specific stakeholder mail-in surveys and also manages a speakers bureau that sends staff volunteers to make presentations and answer questions at meetings of regional organizations, business groups, homeowner associations, and the like. The district also has learned that in-place communication programs can help in responding to unanticipated incidents on the highways or to crisis situations—for example, on September 11, all communications outlets were used to inform com-

mercial traffic and travelers of the immediate restrictions on roadways near the Hoover Dam.

Communicating with residents, tourists, and those who frequently travel through the area requires an ongoing, yet flexible effort. The Kingman District's goal is to "get out in front" on major transportation improvement projects, talking with the public during planning and design, well in advance of construction. Citizens have appreciated the advance notice and the opportunity to identify access and general transportation needs early in the process. This proactive approach also provides an opportunity to inform project managers, contractors, and the agency's construction staff about citizen expectations and to defuse potential issues.

The public outreach program is part of improving service to the customer. Advance communication takes into consideration, and attempts to alleviate, citizen concerns. Even if the communication cannot mitigate the impact of construction on citizens, having project managers talk with citizens, do what they can in response, and then keep citizens informed throughout the project can result in all stakeholders working together to make the process run more smoothly—which means a better, more quickly built final product.



Customers can obtain project information directly from staff at the Kingman District office.



Local television station interviews contractor's project manager about innovative procedures to minimize disruption of traffic during construction.

strengthen its relationship with customers by using customer input to define priorities and select projects.²

Utah DOT: Context Sensitivity

CSD is driving many of the changes in Utah DOT's public involvement process. Utah is one of five states piloting the CSD approach to transportation projects—although the DOT prefers the term, context-sensitive solutions (CSS).

"Even before Utah DOT became a pilot state for CSS, we were making changes to our public outreach program," says Clare Wardle, a Utah DOT project manager who has been involved with the changing public involvement process. "The department had considered placing public involvement coordinators in each highway district."

² For information about Kansas DOT's efforts, e-mail Ron Kaufman at rkaufman@ksdot.org or telephone 785-296-3769.

When Utah became a pilot state for CSS, the DOT hired a consultant to help launch the new process. For CSS to succeed, Utah DOT would have to link the delivery of transportation services with stakeholder relations.

Crafting the Philosophy

The consultant recommended a Futures Conference to convene internal and external stakeholders from around the state. The purpose was to gather input on how the agency should conduct its business and to craft a philosophy for CSS.

Although the conference report indicated a diversity of opinions, the themes on which all stakeholders could agree became a "common futures" list. In particular, the suggestions for a more focused public involvement noted that the agency should identify all stakeholders, start earlier in the process, perform at the



Effective public involvement practitioners match different techniques to specific audiences.

local level, enhance two-way communication, and ensure continuous public participation from inception to project competition.

The Futures Conference and subsequent agency and stakeholder meetings defined a successful project as “technically credible and ... accepted by other agencies and stakeholders.” Three principles guide the buy-in to a credible transportation solution:

1. Address the transportation need;
2. Be an asset to the community; and
3. Emphasize compatibility with the natural and built environments.

The first principle states Utah DOT’s reason for being. The second and third principles indicate how Utah DOT should conduct business to be perceived as successful by the community.

With input from the Futures Conference, the consultant concluded that stakeholders viewed Utah DOT as having only one interest, “building highways.” According to the report, Utah DOT can improve its credibility with most, if not all, of the project stakeholders, “by thinking strategically about alternatives that address transportation demand.”

The consultant identified the need for an “integrated transportation decision-making process” if the agency was to be successful at CSS. The process must be “strong, but a flexible interdisciplinary, interagency collaboration” on technical issues and delivery of services. Additionally, the process must allow for stakeholder involvement from planning through construction or maintenance.

Commitment and Training

This new way of doing business to emphasize public involvement was a message that needed to come from the top, according to Wardle—and it did. The Utah DOT Director and the Deputy Director, who oversaw the agency’s regions, embraced the commitment to public involvement.

“They were strong and vocal about their commitment,” Wardle says. However, design engineers initially protested the idea of increasing public involvement: “They were concerned that it would mean additional costs and a compromise of design standards.”

To shift away from this attitude, the consultant recommended an aggressive training program for all project managers, functional managers, and core design team members. The training focused on how Utah

DOT delivers projects and how teams could work together effectively in project delivery.

Utah DOT also hired public involvement coordinators for the regional offices. The coordinators report to regional managers but maintain a “dotted line” or ancillary reporting relationship to the public affairs director. They, too, have received the training.

The primary responsibility of the public involvement coordinators is to ensure that an effective public involvement process is in place throughout a project. At the same time, the regional director and project manager are accountable, with responsibility for ensuring that public involvement occurs and that the correct values, processes, and resources are used.

Establishing New Ways

Evelyn Tuddenham, one of Utah DOT’s public involvement coordinators, points out that the agency had the philosophy in place long before the processes were identified and implemented. She emphasizes the importance of meeting with staff from other areas and understanding what they do.

“You really have to understand why and how a certain division does something before you can work together to put in place an effective public involvement process,” she notes.

According to Tuddenham, a plan has been devised for all major projects: “It’s a simple plan formatted on a single piece of paper. The plan lists the stakeholders, the messages, and a set of strategies and objectives.”

Tuddenham and others in the agency have recognized that traditional methods of public involvement in project development—such as open houses and public meetings—have limited effect. The agency now is looking into focus groups, meetings with city and county planners, and personal one-on-one meetings with selected stakeholders as part of the process. Surveys and public education efforts also are under consideration.

Tuddenham thinks that new ways of involving the public in the transportation process will become the rule, not the exception, at state DOTs. But is the new way of doing public involvement working? According to Wardle, one gauge is media coverage: “Two years ago, we were beat up in the media on everything, but now I’ve seen a shift in how articles are coming out, and I think public involvement has been a key.”³

Acknowledgment

Donna Purcell Mayes, Assistant Public Affairs Director, Virginia DOT, contributed to this article.

³ For more information about Utah DOT’s efforts, contact Clare Wardle at cwardle@dot.state.ut.us or Evelyn Tuddenham at etuddenham@dot.state.ut.us.